

REPORT ON CSO ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES – LESSONS LEARNED AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) constitutes a strategic framework designed to align the region's economies with the European Union's Green Deal. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are central to this transition, serving as intermediaries between policymakers, private-sector actors and local communities. This report examines the engagement of CSOs within the EU4Green initiative and assesses their role in advancing the Green Agenda, drawing on empirical evidence from specific EU4Green pilot projects presented in the pilot section of the report.

Key findings

Key findings indicate that while CSOs are instrumental in knowledge transfer, stakeholder engagement, and project implementation, they face significant systemic constraints. These include limited financial resources, lack of formal consultation mechanisms, and institutional resistance. Despite these hurdles, CSOs have demonstrated the capacity to act as effective "watchdogs," shifting environmental governance from "compliance-on-paper to performance-in-practice".

Recommendations

To accelerate the green transition, this report recommends institutionalizing CSO participation in policymaking, such as through the Community of Practice (CoP) for NbS, and establishing formal mechanisms for technical dialogue in Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs). It is equally important to emphasize that CSOs should complement rather than substitute the responsibilities of public authorities; state institutions must therefore develop and maintain robust monitoring systems, effective compliance frameworks, and transparent procedural mechanisms, and must not rely on CSOs to perform these core governance functions.

Furthermore, sustainable financing models must be developed to move CSOs beyond precarious project-based funding and enable their long-term strategic engagement. Such models should also foster stable, trust-based cooperation between public authorities and CSOs, ensuring that support strengthens genuine civil society actors rather than creating consultancy-type arrangements driven by narrow self-interests. Building these relationships requires time and continuity so that CSOs can contribute effectively and independently to the green transition.

Regarding Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), engagement should be strengthened by digitizing notifications, ensuring a long consultation window, and formalizing access to draft data. Additionally, the process requires independent expert reviews, clear sanctions for misinformation, and legal alignment with EU standards like the Aarhus Convention to ensure data quality and accountability.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report, titled "Report on CSO Engagement Activities – Lessons Learned and Recommendations," serves as a comprehensive analysis of civil society's role in the EU4Green project and the broader Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. Its primary objective is to evaluate the effectiveness of CSO engagement strategies, identify structural barriers, and propose actionable recommendations.

The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans is aligned with the European Green Deal, focusing on decarbonization, circular economy, depollution of air, water, and soil, sustainable agriculture, and biodiversity. The participation of CSOs is a cross-cutting pillar of this agenda, embedded in the GAWB Action Plan to ensure inclusive engagement and local ownership. The Aarhus Convention further mandates the involvement of CSOs in environmental decision-making, guaranteeing access to information and justice.

Civil society engagement in environmental issues across the Western Balkans has expanded rapidly, with regional studies reporting a significant increase in environmental NGOs in recent years (Vukadinovic 2023). Institutions such as the EU and the Regional Cooperation Council also emphasize the importance of active CSO involvement in shaping and monitoring green policies (Clingendael 2021; Vukadinovic 2023).

This report aggregates findings from a series of regional workshops, pilot cases, and studies conducted between 2023 and 2025. Evidence was compiled through a review of mission reports, participant feedback, and policy briefs.

2. ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF CSOS IN ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

CSOs perform multiple governance functions. They advocate and contribute to policy formulation by reviewing draft laws, identifying gaps, and advising on EU alignment. For instance, environmental NGOs in BiH have scrutinized sewage-sludge-management regulations, lobbied for clear definitions and EU standards, and spotlighted enforcement weaknesses (EU4GREEN Report on Sewage Sludge management 2025). This policy advocacy "broadens the evidence base" for decision-makers. CSOs also engage communities and raise public awareness. They translate technical issues (like wastewater treatment) into accessible language, hold public consultations and site visits, and broker dialogue between officials and citizens.

Beyond advocacy and outreach, CSOs build capacity and share knowledge by engaging directly with public authorities. During the series of EU4GREEN workshops, CSOs exchanged knowledge and best practices with regional and local representatives from public institutions and municipalities, and this collaborative exchange proved particularly fruitful in fostering

mutual understanding, generating practical solutions, and strengthening joint ownership of environmental initiatives.

3. INSTITUTIONAL, TECHNICAL AND FINANCIAL CAPACITIES OF CSOS

While playing these roles, CSOs often face capacity limitations. Most CSOs in the region are small, project-driven organizations with limited budgets and staff. This means they may lack technical expertise or up-to-date information (hence the demand for the Community of practice that “disseminate the latest research” on nature-based solutions). Funding shortages are chronic: EU4GREEN workshops devoted sessions to “green finance,” underscoring the need for more accessible grants for CSO-led projects. In practice, many CSOs rely on short-term project funds, which hampers long-term engagement and strategic planning. Institutional support can also be weak; training or exchange opportunities are valued precisely because they fill existing gaps. For example, the establishment of a Community of practice for Nature-based Solutions as a regional NbS knowledge-sharing platform provide CSOs with the possibility to exchange best practices and hand-one experiences.

These capacity constraints mean that, without support, CSOs struggle to sustain complex initiatives. Technical gaps are evident (prompting demands for continued workshops on standards and tools) and institutional networks are still maturing. Nonetheless, CSOs have shown adaptability: through peer networks and partnerships they pool expertise, and through alliances they access broader resources. Any analysis of their capacities must note both these persistent limitations and the way targeted interventions (training, networking) can partially mitigate them. In general, CSOs should complement, not replace, the responsibilities of public authorities; state institutions must build and maintain their own robust monitoring, compliance and procedural systems rather than relying on CSOs to carry out these core governance functions.

4. VALUE-ADDED CONTRIBUTIONS OF CSOS

Despite challenges, CSOs add crucial value that governments and private actors alone cannot provide. Their local knowledge and community trust enable solutions tailored to specific contexts. For example, CSOs often identify “blind spots” in official plans and bring ground-level insights into policy discussions. In BiH for example, CSOs’ documentation of local grievances (e.g. odors from wastewater treatment plants) led to simple fixes like adjusting truck routes or creating buffer zones. By aggregating on-the-ground data and community perspectives, CSOs ensure policies remain relevant and responsive.

CSOs also bridge sectors and scales. They link grassroots initiatives to regional goals. The NbS Community of Practice (CoP) is a good example: it connected CSOs from multiple economies with policy-makers and experts, so that “CSOs link ground-level projects to broader policy goals”. Moreover, CSOs can innovate and pilot community-led solutions (such as sustainable grazing projects or circular-economy trials) that demonstrate what is possible, then advocate for their scaling. They effectively translate national or EU strategies into local action.

CSOs also function as an important corrective force. Rather than simply voicing concerns, they frequently offer well-reasoned alternatives. For example, in debates on sludge management, NGOs have conducted comparative assessments (e.g., land application versus incineration) to illuminate cumulative risks and support evidence-based decision-making. When influential actors advocate for rapid or simplistic solutions, CSOs draw attention to the needs of vulnerable groups, helping ensure that policies do not disproportionately burden rural or marginalized communities.

In the EU4GREEN local workshop on municipal air-pollution measures in Glogoc/Kosovo*, local CSOs provided first-hand knowledge of community practices, behavioural patterns and public concerns that are often absent from technical modelling. Their contributions helped contextualize air-quality results and ensured that planning assumptions reflected actual heating practices and local emission sources.

Overall, CSOs do not merely critique; they shape projects constructively, anchoring policy in lived realities, strengthening trust through engagement, and enriching decision-making with community-driven perspectives.

5. BARRIERS AND CONSTRAINTS TO CSO ENGAGEMENT

The literature highlights several persistent barriers. Financial constraints are paramount: “limited budgets and staff resources often hamper” CSO contributions to complex issues. Many CSOs depend on project funding, leaving them vulnerable to a “short-term” horizon. Technical capacity gaps also exist: CSOs have frequently limited access to latest research and standards, meaning they need intensive capacity-building efforts.

On the institutional side, engagement processes are often ad hoc. In workshops CSOs reported that consultations are frequently organized at the “last minute,” giving CSOs little time to prepare or provide input. There is often insufficient information: CSOs lack clear channels to track who is doing what in the Green Agenda implementation. Moreover, policy and regulatory barriers can exclude CSOs. The absence of formal inclusion mechanisms (e.g. mandated CSO seats on committees) means participation depends on goodwill. Where participatory procedures are weak or unclear, civil society input risks being ignored.

Finally, political and cultural resistance can limit CSO influence. Governments or industries may view NGOs as troublesome rather than partners. This perception creates tension: CSOs report being undervalued or sidelined, which necessitates building trust through “open

dialogue”. Cross-border evidence suggests this is a region-wide issue: Balkan CSOs have described themselves as a “watchdog” to government inertia, which requires strategic communication to overcome initial suspicion.

Integration of Workshop Outputs and Practitioner Perspectives

Insights from EU4GREEN workshops and pilot events reinforce these findings. In the meetings of the Community of Practice for Nature-Based Solutions (March and September 2025), CSOs were highly engaged: participants actively discussed opportunities and even helped set the agenda. Their feedback emphasized practical challenges (e.g. funding, technical standards) mirroring the broader barriers noted above. Importantly, CSOs reported that these events offered valuable learning and networking: many “gained knowledge and networks” and expressed strong interest in future CoP activities. Likewise, the Green Transition training workshop (Oct 2023) demonstrated CSO contributions firsthand: organizers noted that CSOs’ grassroots insights and innovative perspectives “added significant value” to discussions on education and micro-credentials.

These practitioner observations confirm that when given structured platforms, CSOs contribute substantively and see clear benefits. Workshop reports of EU4Green show CSOs not as passive observers but as active co-creators, eager to exchange best practices and apply them to the region’s priorities. This confirms that interactive, multi-stakeholder formats are effective for tapping CSO expertise, and that the on-the-ground perspectives resonate in real-world workshops.

6. LESSONS LEARNED

Experiences across EU4GREEN activities demonstrate that meaningful CSO engagement depends on a combination of sustained networking, transparency, and institutional support. Long-term platforms such as multi-stakeholder forums enable trust-building and knowledge exchange, while timely access to clear information allows CSOs to contribute strategically rather than reactively. When embedded in local planning processes and supported by predictable funding and formal participation mechanisms, CSOs are able to generate practical solutions, strengthen accountability, and enhance the credibility and effectiveness of environmental decision-making.

Key lessons learned

Sustained Networking Platforms Significantly Increase CSO Impact

- Regular multi-stakeholder forums and Communities of Practice foster trust, peer learning, and cross-border synergies among CSOs and other actors. Experiences show that continuous platforms are far more effective than isolated events in strengthening cooperation and amplifying civil society contributions.

- **Lesson:** Long-term, structured networking platforms are powerful enablers of meaningful and sustained CSO engagement.

Transparency and Timely Information Are Fundamental Preconditions

- CSOs' effectiveness is directly linked to access to clear, timely, and reliable information. Uncertainty around roles, responsibilities, and timelines undermines their ability to contribute strategically and substantively. Shared information systems and transparent communication processes are therefore essential.
- **Lesson:** Without systematic transparency, CSO participation remains fragmented and limited in impact.

Local CSO Engagement Generates Practical and Innovative Solutions

- When CSOs engage directly with communities during project design and implementation, they often identify simple, low-cost, and context-specific solutions that may be overlooked by centralized planning approaches. This local perspective enhances both effectiveness and acceptance of environmental measures.
- **Lesson:** Embedding CSOs in local-level planning improves problem-solving and leads to more adaptive and innovative outcomes.

Sustainable CSO Engagement Requires Predictable, Long-Term Funding

- Short-term, project-based funding undermines continuity, institutional memory, and professional capacity within CSOs. Lessons from multiple initiatives highlight the need to move toward multi-year funding frameworks that allow CSOs to plan strategically and maintain skilled staff.
- **Lesson:** Stable, multi-year funding is a prerequisite for reliable and effective CSO participation.

Institutionalized CSO Roles and Technical Dialogue Strengthen Accountability and Improve EIA Quality

- Evidence from workshops and Environmental Impact Assessments processes shows that informal or ad hoc consultations are inadequate for ensuring either accountability or technical rigor. Effective CSO engagement requires formalized participation mechanisms—including clear legal mandates, guaranteed consultation points, structured access to data, and recurring opportunities for technical dialogue.
- Such institutionalized arrangements, supported by targeted capacity building, enable CSOs not only to provide independent scrutiny but also to engage meaningfully with baseline data, impact assessments, and proposed mitigation measures.

- **Lesson:** Embedding CSO participation and technical dialogue within formal procedures is essential for credible decision-making, stronger environmental and social safeguards, and higher analytical quality, especially in Environmental Impact Assessments.

7. REPLICABLE SUCCESSSES AND REGION-WIDE CHALLENGES

Recent EU4GREEN experiences across the Western Balkans highlight both the growing potential and the persistent constraints of CSO engagement in Green Agenda implementation. While inclusive forums, pilot workshops, and Communities of Practice have demonstrated clear value in fostering dialogue, learning, and policy-relevant input, structural challenges such as institutional inertia, limited resources, and recurring regulatory gaps continue to hinder deeper integration of CSOs into governance processes. These shared regional patterns suggest a strong case for scaling successful models and jointly addressing systemic barriers through coordinated, region-wide solutions.

- Creation of inclusive forums and tools. Across the region, there is a clear need for structured spaces where CSOs, public authorities and technical experts can exchange knowledge and coordinate action. The Community of Practice for Nature-based Solutions (CoP-NbS) responds to this gap and has already demonstrated a replicable model of cross-border cooperation. By convening CSOs and decision-makers from all six economies, it has helped build shared understanding, strengthen networks and support more coherent policy approaches.
- In this context, the proposal for a centralized information hub emerges as a logical next step, providing a scalable mechanism to enhance transparency, data access and regional learning. However, for such a platform to function effectively, the questions of funding, long-term ownership and institutional responsibility—whether by RCC, SWG or other regional actors—must be clearly defined, jointly established and designed in an inclusive manner.

Given the demonstrated impact of these cooperation mechanisms, similar platforms could be extended to additional sectors such as waste management or energy, where comparable coordination challenges and knowledge gaps persist.

- Pilot workshops that bring together CSOs, government representatives and technical experts have demonstrated clear mutual benefits. Joint training formats—such as those on education micro-credentials—have not only strengthened CSO capacities but also generated insights that informed policy development. Building on these positive results, the next step is to establish more systematic, continuous engagement and structured skills-training programmes, enabling these multi-stakeholder models to be replicated and scaled across additional Green Agenda priority areas.

- Institutional inertia. Despite successes, a common challenge in all Western Balkan states is the slow pace of integrating CSOs into governance. Across the region, CSOs report still being treated as “watchdogs” rather than partners. Bureaucracies often lack procedures for CSO input, leading to tokenistic consultations instead of a reciprocal relation.
- All surveyed CSOs face tight budgets and staff shortages. This is a systemic challenge: even well-motivated CSOs struggle to sustain long-term projects.
- Similar policy gaps. Region-wide, CSOs identify analogous regulatory gaps (for example, in public participation laws or sewage sludge definitions). This suggests that solutions can be shared: drafting harmonized guidelines or toolkits could benefit multiple economies.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

To translate the growing engagement of civil society into lasting impact, targeted structural and policy measures are required. Building on lessons from EU4GREEN workshops, the following recommendations focus on institutionalizing participation, strengthening networks and capacities, improving access to finance, and ensuring transparent and predictable engagement processes. Together, these measures aim to move CSO involvement from ad hoc participation toward a stable, strategic partnership in implementing the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.

- Establish formal engagement platforms. Create permanent CSO consultation mechanisms for the Green Agenda (regional and national). For example, the NGO Forum recommended an “information hub” and consultation platform hosted by the RCC/EU4GREEN to coordinate CSO participation. Policymakers should adopt such structures (online portals, regular roundtables) so that CSOs know when and how to contribute.
- The peer-learning structures developed under EU4GREEN—most notably the Community of Practice for Nature-based Solutions (CoP-NbS), established in 2025 as a regional platform to empower CSOs in advancing the Western Balkans’ Green Agenda—have demonstrated strong potential for long-term impact. Jointly initiated by EU4GREEN and implemented by EAA and IUCN ECARO, the CoP was designed to build a robust network of professionals, policymakers, researchers and community actors working on NbS. Its founding meeting in Skopje (March 2025) and subsequent regional session in September 2025 confirmed broad commitment to its continuation.

As EU4GREEN concludes in summer 2026, the planned transfer of full responsibility for the CoP to IUCN ECARO—supported by dedicated staff and stable funding—will be essential to ensure continuity and sustained benefits for CSOs. Building on this model, similar CSO workshops (e.g., on circular economy or air quality) should be formalized within future project frameworks. Over time, these networks can evolve

into self-sustaining platforms that leverage collective expertise, strengthen regional cooperation and support CSOs in shaping the green transition.

- Expand capacity-building and knowledge exchange. Scale up tailored training, webinars and study tours for CSOs. The CoP workshops showed that CSOs need ongoing technical and advocacy training. Develop toolkits (e.g. on EU funding sources, monitoring methods) and an online repository of case studies. Encourage CSO-to-CSO mentoring (e.g. experienced groups advising newer NGOs). Donors should support multi-year grants for CSOs to build institutional memory.
- Improve access to financing. Address the funding gap by creating dedicated small-grants programs for CSO-led green projects. Partner with development banks and IPA funds to earmark resources for CSO initiatives (for instance, requiring CSO co-applicants in public tenders). The CoP's focus on "green finance" indicates CSOs could be linked to existing EU climate funds. Multi-year funding frameworks (rather than only project-based grants) should be prioritized.
- Embed CSOs in policymaking processes. Mandate CSO review of draft Green Agenda legislation and plans. For example, use formal platforms (like the CoP) as official consultation forums: draft NbS strategies should pass through CSO networks for feedback. Institutionalize periodic dialogues between CSOs and authorities (the forum participants even requested quarterly EU-CSO meetings). Ensure that national governments similarly require open consultations and best practices for CSO inclusion in line with IPA funds.
- Enhance transparency and communication. Implement the NGO Forum's call for greater transparency in the GAWB implementation. Publish and regularly update a public timeline of Green Agenda activities, responsible agencies and points of CSO contact. Establish clear communication channels (newsletters, social media, info hub) so CSOs can track progress and respond in a timely way. Transparent information-sharing will build trust and allow CSOs to plan their involvement effectively.
- Ad hoc or sporadic consultations are inadequate for tackling the technical demands of Environmental Impact Assessments. Establishing regular, structured mechanisms for technical dialogue—supported by targeted capacity-building programs—enables CSOs to provide informed input on baseline data, impact analyses, and mitigation measures.

9. PILOT CASES

This summary details the specific CSO engagement activities fostered by EU4Green from 2023 to 2025:

PILOT CASE (WP3-2_ACT-5): SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF SEWAGE SLUDGE

A local workshop on sewage sludge (November 27, 2025, Sarajevo) gathered municipalities, CSOs, WWTP operators and academics to assess sludge management in BiH. It covered research and innovation, legal/financial challenges, and public awareness. The meeting engaged CSOs in discussing current practices and needs. CSO participants contributed by sharing local case examples and stakeholder concerns. The workshop underscored sludge management as a cross-cutting issue (environment, health, economy) and demonstrated the value of including CSOs in technical discussions.

Key Lessons Learned

Early CSO Engagement Strengthens Policy Coherence and EU Alignment

- Involving CSOs early in legislative and regulatory processes improves the quality, consistency, and implementability of sludge policies. CSOs help identify legal contradictions, clarify technical requirements, and ensure alignment with EU directives before adoption.
- **Lesson:** Upstream CSO participation leads to more coherent, enforceable, and EU-compliant sludge regulations.

CSOs Are Essential for Public Trust and Social Acceptance

- Public resistance to sludge treatment and reuse is a major barrier in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans. CSOs play a decisive role in translating technical information, addressing concerns, and rebuilding trust following environmental incidents.
- **Lesson:** Without CSO-led communication and mediation, technically sound sludge solutions risk social rejection.

Independent CSO Oversight Enhances Transparency and Accountability

- CSOs provide independent monitoring, data scrutiny, and citizen support in cases of non-compliance. Their oversight function helps move sludge management from formal compliance to effective environmental protection, particularly where enforcement capacity is limited.

- **Lesson:** Independent civil oversight is critical for credibility, transparency, and enforcement effectiveness.

CSO Impact Depends on an Enabling Institutional and Financial Environment

- While CSOs add clear value, their effectiveness is constrained by unstable funding, lacking technical expertise, limited access to decision-making, and weak institutionalization of participation. Long-term impact requires predictable financing and formal participation mechanisms.
- **Lesson:** Strengthening CSO contributions requires deliberate policy measures to create a stable and enabling environment for civil society engagement.

ACTIVITY (WP3-2_ACT-2): WES BALKAN NGO FORUM 2023

An EU4GREEN/RCC forum held on 30 March 2023 brought together CSOs and government representatives from all six Western Balkan economies to discuss the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB). Participants agreed that CSOs are “crucial” for advocacy, monitoring, public consultation and awareness-raising, but highlighted persistent challenges: limited access to information, difficulty reaching decision-makers, scarce financial resources and participation processes that often occur too late for meaningful input.

In response, the Forum issued several recommendations to strengthen CSO engagement. A key priority was greater transparency on GAWB activities—specifically clearer information from RCC, EU4GREEN and national institutions on who is doing what and when. To address this gap, participants proposed establishing an information hub and consultation platform to centralize updates, map ongoing initiatives, facilitate communication and enable continuous dialogue among CSOs.

Additional recommendations included developing practical cross-border projects aligned with the GAWB, strengthening capacity-building and stakeholder cooperation, organizing regular NGO forums for knowledge exchange, and ensuring closer coordination with policymakers so that CSO input is systematically integrated.

Key lessons learned:

CSOs Are Central to Effective Implementation of the Green Agenda

- Discussions at the NGO Forum confirmed that CSOs play a crucial role across all thematic pillars of the Green Agenda, particularly in advocacy, monitoring implementation, public consultation, and awareness raising. Their engagement strengthens accountability and helps translate high-level Green Agenda commitments into concrete actions at national and local levels.

- **Lesson:** The success of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans depends on the systematic and meaningful involvement of CSOs throughout its implementation cycle.

Limited Access to Information Undermines Meaningful CSO Engagement

- A major barrier identified by participants is the lack of timely and structured information on Green Agenda activities, responsibilities, and timelines at both regional and national levels. Without clarity on “who does what and when,” CSOs are unable to engage strategically or provide informed input.
- **Lesson:** Transparency and timely information-sharing are prerequisites for effective CSO participation in the Green Agenda.

Late and Informal Consultation Reduces the Value of CSO Input

- CSOs reported that participation processes are often organized at the last minute, leaving insufficient time for analysis, coordination, and evidence-based contributions. In addition, decision-makers do not consistently treat CSO inputs as substantive or actionable.
- **Lesson:** Late-stage consultations significantly weaken the quality and impact of CSO contributions to Green Agenda implementation.

CSO Effectiveness Depends on Resources, Capacity, and Political Recognition

- Financial constraints, limited access to decision-makers, and insufficient recognition by authorities restrict CSOs’ ability to contribute effectively. Strengthening CSO participation requires not only funding and capacity-building, but also closer and more structured collaboration with policymakers to ensure CSO input is taken seriously and integrated into Green Agenda processes.
- **Lesson:** Without adequate resources and political recognition, CSOs cannot fully perform their role as partners in delivering the Green Agenda.

PILOT CASE (WP3-2_ACT-6): GREEN TRANSITION & CIRCULAR ECONOMY TRAINING

In October 2023, EU4GREEN hosted a regional workshop in Sarajevo on “green transition & circular economy” training. 51 stakeholders participated, including ministries, universities and CSOs from across the region. The workshop aimed to assess regulatory requirements for micro-credentials (MCs) and to foster collaboration on developing MC learning programs. It identified educational needs for green skills at different levels. Importantly, CSOs actively contributed: their grassroots perspectives complemented academic and institutional inputs, improving understanding of local needs. Participants noted that CSO involvement ensured

the outcomes were not only technically sound but also socially relevant and widely supported. This pilot case highlighted that involving CSOs in education and training planning yields more inclusive and demand-driven programs.

Key lessons learned

CSO Participation Ensures Social Relevance and Demand-Driven Training Design

- CSOs contributed grassroots perspectives that complemented academic and institutional inputs, helping to identify real-world skills needs related to the green transition and circular economy. Their involvement ensured that proposed micro-credential programs addressed local realities and societal demand, rather than remaining purely technical or theoretical.
- **Lesson:** Involving CSOs in education and training planning leads to more inclusive, socially relevant, and demand-driven learning programs.

Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration Strengthens the Quality and Acceptance of Training Outcomes

- The joint participation of ministries, universities, and CSOs improved mutual understanding and resulted in training concepts that were both technically sound and broadly supported. CSO engagement enhanced legitimacy and increased the likelihood that new green skills programs will be accepted and utilized by target groups.
- **Lesson:** CSO engagement strengthens the credibility, inclusiveness, and uptake of green transition education and training initiatives.

PILOT CASE (WP3-2_ACT-7): AIR POLLUTION MEASURES IN MUNICIPALITIES

A regional seminar on air quality (January 31–February 1, 2024, Sarajevo) brought together experts, local governments and CSOs. They focused on air-quality planning, modeling, and pollution from domestic heating and agricultural burning. CSOs provided input on community practices and concerns. The seminar identified key challenges (e.g. winter heating emissions) and gathered recommendations from participants. Based on this, EU4GREEN developed two further workshops to focus on role of CSO for improvement air quality management. The local pilot workshop in Glogoc (Kosovo*) in Dec 2025 engaged municipal and CSO representatives to define locally feasible actions for cleaner air. Findings from the local workshop were presented at a regional online workshop two weeks later, attended by municipal officials and CSO representatives from all Western Balkan economies. This exchange highlighted the importance of sustained collaboration between municipalities and CSOs at the local level: municipal authorities bring mandate and resources, while CSOs contribute contextual knowledge, community trust and monitoring capacity.

These activities illustrate that EU4GREEN is using CSO involvement to foster municipal–CSO cooperation on environmental issues.

Key lessons learned

Joint Municipal–CSO Platforms Enable Practical and Action-Oriented Cooperation

- Bringing municipal authorities and CSOs together in structured workshops creates a practical forum for identifying concrete areas of cooperation. In air-quality seminars and local pilot workshops, joint discussions moved beyond abstract policy debates to focus on locally feasible measures addressing priority pollution sources such as domestic heating and agricultural burning. A regional information and consultation platform—modeled on the Community of Practice for Nature-based Solutions (CoP-NbS)—could institutionalize this approach by hosting regular workshops, mapping local emission sources, sharing best practices and facilitating sustained municipal–CSO collaboration to translate regional priorities into effective local action.

Lesson: Structured joint platforms are effective tools for translating air quality strategies into actionable municipal–CSO cooperation.

CSOs Add Local Knowledge Essential for Effective Air Quality Planning

- CSOs contribute first-hand insights into community practices, behavioral patterns, and public concerns that are often not captured by technical models alone. Their input helped contextualize air-quality modeling results and ensured that planning assumptions reflected real-life heating practices and local emission sources.
- **Lesson:** Integrating CSO knowledge improves the relevance and realism of air quality planning and measures.

Local Pilot Engagement Strengthens Regional Learning and Policy Coherence

- The local pilot workshop in Glogoc demonstrated that testing cooperation models at municipal level generates practical insights. Transferring these insights to a subsequent regional workshop enabled cross-economy learning and informed EU4GREEN’s broader air quality support activities.
- **Lesson:** Local pilots with strong CSO involvement are effective laboratories for scalable regional air quality solutions.

PILOT CASE (WP3-2_ACT-9): WESTERN BALKAN COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE FOR NBS

The EU4GREEN project and the IUCN ECARO launched a Community of Practice on Nature-Based Solutions (CoP NbS) for the Western Balkans. The initiative began with a biodiversity/NbS webinar on June 5, 2024, which announced the creation of the CoP. The CoP aims to establish a network of practitioners, including civil society organizations (CSOs), to share NbS knowledge across the region. The inaugural CoP workshop was held on March 12, 2025, in Skopje. CSOs participated actively, exchanging experiences on sustainable agriculture and climate resilience and helping to shape the CoP's agenda. The second meeting, which took place in Podgorica on September 23-24, 2025, was part of the "Measures on the Field" conference and focused on NbS in agriculture, including sustainable grazing and water management.

Key lessons learned

CSOs Contribute Essential Practical Experience and Field-Based Knowledge

- CSOs actively enriched CoP discussions by sharing hands-on experience from sustainable agriculture, climate resilience, grazing management, and water stewardship projects. Their field-level insights complemented scientific and policy perspectives and helped ground NbS concepts in practical realities.
- **Lesson:** CSO participation ensures that NbS approaches remain practice-oriented and responsive to on-the-ground challenges.

Interactive and Participatory Formats Strengthen Ownership and Collaboration

- The interactive workshop sessions enabled participants to jointly identify challenges, opportunities, and expectations for the CoP NbS. This participatory approach fostered a strong sense of ownership, collaboration, and shared purpose among CSOs, policymakers, and practitioners.
- **Lesson:** Participatory formats are critical for building commitment and long-term engagement within Communities of Practice.

Capacity Building and Common Standards Enhance CSO Effectiveness

- Presentations on the IUCN NbS Standard, practical implementation guides, and tools such as the Green Agenda Navigator significantly strengthened participants' technical understanding. Access to shared standards, tools, and guidance empowers CSOs to align their activities with regional and international best practices.
- **Lesson:** Targeted capacity-building within CoPs enhances the quality, credibility, and scalability of CSO-led NbS initiatives.

PILOT CASE (WP3-2_ACT-10): CIRCULAR ECONOMY: PEER LEARNING EVENTS WITH CSO ON REGIONAL & NATIONAL LEVEL

As part of circular economy (CE) initiatives, EU4GREEN organized pilot trainings at the municipality level. In May 2024 a workshop was held in Vlora and Shkodra (Albania) with municipal officials, CSOs and other stakeholders. Participants identified the local capacities and skills needed to implement CE practices. This exercise fed into developing training materials for municipalities. EU4GREEN created CE guidelines and training tools co-developed with local authorities and CSOs. Further training sessions were held (e.g. Apr 2025 in Albania/Kosovo). In these activities CSOs collaborated with municipalities to assess gaps and co-design solutions. This pilot demonstrates how EU4GREEN engaged CSOs in CE by jointly diagnosing local needs and preparing targeted capacity-building materials.

Joint CSO–Municipal Needs Assessment Leads to More Targeted and Effective Capacity Building

- By engaging CSOs alongside municipal authorities in identifying local capacities and skills gaps, the pilot trainings ensured that circular economy guidance and training materials were grounded in real municipal needs. CSO input helped capture practical constraints and opportunities that might otherwise be overlooked in top-down training design.
- **Lesson:** Co-diagnosing needs with CSOs and municipalities results in more relevant, demand-driven circular economy capacity-building tools.

Co-Development of Training Tools Strengthens Ownership and Implementation

- The collaborative development of CE guidelines and training materials fostered shared ownership among municipalities and CSOs. This increased the usability of the tools and improved their acceptance during follow-up training sessions, supporting sustained implementation of circular economy practices at local level.
- **Lesson:** Co-developing capacity-building materials with CSOs enhances ownership, usability, and long-term uptake of circular economy measures.

PILOT CASE (WP3-2_ACT-11): STRENGTHENING CSO PARTICIPATION IN EIAs (WP3-2_ACT-11)

EU4GREEN pursued greater CSO involvement in Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) processes. A questionnaire on green finance for EIAs was developed, and a regional peer-learning workshop took place in Tirana, Albania (Nov 27, 2025). This workshop brought CSOs

from across the WB6 together to share good practices and challenges in EIA participation. Building on it, a policy brief titled “Strengthening Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs): the CSO perspective” was produced (EU4GREEN – Policy Brief 2025). The policy brief synthesizes workshop insights, noting that CSOs face limited transparency, short consultation periods and technical barriers in EIAs. It provides recommendations for improving public engagement in EIA processes.

Transparency and Early Access Are Prerequisites for Meaningful CSO Participation

- CSOs’ ability to contribute effectively to EIAs is fundamentally constrained by limited access to information, fragmented notification systems, and short consultation periods. The peer-learning workshop and subsequent policy brief demonstrated that centralized, timely, and accessible information is essential for enabling informed and substantive CSO engagement.
- **Lesson:** Without transparent, early, and standardized access to EIA information, CSO participation remains formal rather than meaningful.

Institutionalized Technical Dialogue Improves the Quality of EIAs

- Ad hoc or informal consultations are insufficient for addressing the technical complexity of EIAs. Structured and recurring mechanisms for technical dialogue—combined with targeted capacity building—allow CSOs to engage constructively with baseline data, impact assessments, and mitigation measures.
- **Lesson:** Formalizing technical dialogue with CSOs enhances the analytical quality and credibility of EIA processes.

Inclusive Participation Builds Trust and Legitimacy in Decision-Making

- Meaningful community participation—through accessible language, participatory tools, and clear feedback loops on how public input is used—was identified as critical for improving trust in EIA outcomes. CSOs play a key role in mobilizing communities and ensuring that participation goes beyond procedural compliance.
- **Lesson:** Inclusive and accessible participation mechanisms are essential for building public trust and legitimacy in EIA processes.

ACTIVITY (WP3-2_ACT-12): FOSTERING ENGAGEMENT IN OTHER PILLARS

CSOs actively participated in workshops across other thematic pillars, including Water Monitoring (WP1-4), Soil Monitoring (WP1-11), and Circular Economy (WP1-3). This cross-cutting engagement ensured that civil society perspectives were integrated into technical discussions on water, soil, and nitrates directive implementation.

- Water Monitoring (5–6 June 2024)
- Circular Economy Regional Meeting (6 June 2024)
- Workshop on Circular Economy, North Macedonia (5 November 2024)
- Soil Monitoring in WB6 towards Participation in LUCAS Soil (19 November 2024)
- Nitrates Directive Implementation: Practical Examples in Agriculture (26 November 2024)
- Training for Urban Wastewater Treatment Plants (26–27 November 2024)
- Distribution of EU4GREEN Report on Development of Emission Reduction Commitments to CSOs
- Workshop: Support to Transfer the Experience of National Circular Economy Actions to the Region (24 June 2025)
- Webinar: Circular Economy Finance (30 October 2025, online)

10. REFERENCES

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** This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and it is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.*